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Lessons from Flint: The Case for Investing in the Building Blocks of Communities of Color

By Tracey Ross and Danyelle Solomon   March 3, 2016

In spring 2014, state emergency managers in Flint, Michigan, spurred a switch of the city's water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River in an effort to save money. The new system diverted city water through old, lead-lined pipes, causing lead—a potent neurotoxin—to seep into the public water supply.[1] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, even minimal lead exposure can cause cognitive and behavioral issues, including a greater likelihood of dropping out of school and an increased tendency toward violence.[2] Over the past couple months, national outrage has grown as additional details have emerged, including how state employees in Flint were provided bottled water while reassuring residents that their water was safe and how Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder (R) and his administration waited months before declaring a state of emergency.[3]

Flint—a once-prosperous city and the birthplace of General Motors—has lost its industrial base over the past few decades, driving an economic decline that has reduced government investment in all forms of infrastructure, including support for the city's schools.[4] More than 40 percent of Flint residents, 56 percent of whom are African American, now live below the federal poverty level.[5] While Flint's lead poisoning epidemic may be unique, public divestment in poor communities of color is not: Far too often, people of color are relegated to living in the country's most underinvested areas.

This is a reality across the country. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods—where more than 40 percent of residents are poor—nearly doubled, rising from 7.2 million to 13.8 million—the highest figure ever recorded.[6] Despite the fact that most low-income people in the United States are white, people of color are much more likely to live in impoverished areas: 1 in 4 African Americans and 1 in 6 Hispanic Americans live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared with just 1 in 13 of their white counterparts.[7] In order to reverse this trend and undo the effects of past discriminatory policies, policymakers must make sustained investments in the low-income communities that people of color disproportionately occupy. This issue brief explores the legacy of discrimination that continues to affect communities of color today and highlights four areas that should be targeted for investment: housing; infrastructure; health; and education.

Where you live matters

In the beginning of the 20th century, local governments began to pass zoning ordinances as a way to separate industrial and residential land uses in order to protect people from hazards and improve public health.[8] In 1926, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* upheld the ability of localities to determine separate uses for land and protect the public good.[9] Over time, however, city planning focused less on public health and more on creating idyllic communities, protecting property rights, and excluding "undesirables," such as people of color and recent immigrants.[10]

For decades, the federal government invested in newly secluded white, suburban communities through government-backed loans, while allowing local governments to ignore low-income communities and communities of color.[11] Beginning in the 1930s, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a government-sponsored corporation created through the New Deal, began to engage in redlining, a practice that actively excluded African American communities from receiving home loans.[12] During the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government's urban renewal effort empowered local governments and private developers to develop downtowns and displace the mostly poor residents of color through practices such as eminent domain, where property is seized in order to continue development, with no procedure for relocation.[13] At best, residents were moved to public housing located in already segregated, poor neighborhoods isolated from any resources.[14]

Rural communities also have been largely neglected over time. While federal rural development efforts have produced much-needed basic infrastructure, many programs throughout the 20th century focused on agricultural policy rather than community needs.[15] Meanwhile, tribal communities—where the federal government has a legal responsibility to provide a variety of basic services—have faced chronic underfunding of critical programs for generations, including those related to education, health, and public safety.[16] In fact, American Indians and Alaska Natives endure the highest poverty rates in the country. According to the 2013 census, 29.2 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives lived below the federal poverty line, higher than the overall U.S. poverty rate of 15.9 percent.[17]

Despite legislative efforts to dismantle segregation and invest in low-income communities and communities of color, the United States remains deeply segregated. For example, data reveal that housing providers, such as real estate agents, show African American homebuyers and renters fewer properties than whites and that blacks are often steered away from predominantly white neighborhoods.[18]

The average African American family making $100,000 per year lives in a more disadvantaged neighborhood than the average white family making $30,000 per year.[19] This limited neighborhood choice creates a multigenerational problem. According to sociologist Patrick Sharkey of New York University, more than 70 percent of the African American residents of America's poorest and most segregated neighborhoods are the children and grandchildren of those who lived in similar neighborhoods 40 years ago.[20]

Residents of these communities face inferior housing and infrastructure, poor health outcomes, underperforming schools, and little to no economic opportunity. According to Barbara Sard, vice president for housing policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, or CBPP, and Douglas Rice, senior policy analyst at CBPP, living in such neighborhoods can impair children's cognitive development and academic performance.[21] Moving children to better neighborhoods at a young age, however, can yield huge results. A recent study by Harvard University economists Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz found that if a person moves to a low-poverty area—where the poverty rate is less than 20 percent—as a child, he or she will see an increase in total lifetime earnings of around $302,000.[22]

Whatever the benefits, it is not possible to move every family into a more prosperous community. As Chetty stated during an event at the Brookings Institution in 2015:

> [A]t the end of the day, while moving people can be one useful policy tool, there are limits to the scalability of such a policy, right? You can't move everybody from Harlem to the Bronx, and expect to get the same types of outcomes. So, you also ultimately need to think about policies that can improve existing neighborhoods.[23]

While policies that enable low-income people and people of color to live in more prosperous communities are important, leaders cannot ignore the many people who will remain in underserved communities. Policymakers, therefore, must make targeted investments in key areas to ensure that all communities are quality places to live and work.

Building blocks of a strong community

Certain basic tenants make up healthy communities. The houses we live in, the roads and public transportation we use, the food we eat, and the schools we attend all serve as the building blocks of our daily lives. These building blocks do not just show up; they are the result of policies that enable residents to thrive and pursue opportunities. Communities need affordable housing, access to quality food and outdoor spaces, reliable public transportation, quality schools, and good health care. Unfortunately, communities of color continue to be disproportionately affected by government policies and practices that neglect the basic tenants of our daily lives.

By 2044, there will be no clear racial or ethnic majority in America.[24] The changing demographics are inevitable, leaving policymakers with two choices: Fight the inevitable by continuing to underinvest in communities of color or embrace the change and prepare accordingly. The former would leave the majority of the U.S. population underserved and the United States unable to maintain its status as a world leader.

Housing

A long legacy of legal segregation and discriminatory housing policy has created enduringly segregated, high-poverty communities across the country. To make matters worse, the United States is in the midst of a rental affordability crisis that is particularly harmful for people of color. Twenty-six percent of black households, 23 percent of Hispanic households, and 20 percent of Asian and other minority households faced severe rent burdens in 2013, compared with just 14 percent of white households.[25]

Overall, 13.8 million Americans now live in high-poverty neighborhoods, where more than 40 percent of residents are poor.[26] However, more than 16.4 percent of low-income Latinos and 23.6 percent of low-income African Americans live in high-poverty neighborhoods, more than any other group.[27] Communities of concentrated poverty often lack critical amenities such as high-quality schools, parks, and access to job markets, and residents are more likely to be exposed to violence[28] and harmful environmental factors, such as increased levels of air pollution.[29] Children living in concentrated poverty are more likely to have impaired cognitive ability and are more likely to drop out of high school than their counterparts living in low-poverty areas.[30]

This is why efforts to preserve affordable housing, end exclusionary zoning, and ensure greater access to housing vouchers that allow residents to move to high-opportunity areas are critical.[31] For example, San Francisco's HOPE SF initiative aims to renovate four extremely distressed public housing sites, transform these communities, and improve their residents' lives. Its goal is to create mixed-income communities that better serve public housing residents. The effort is employing a number of innovative housing strategies, including staggering the replacement of public housing units in order to prevent displacement of residents, connecting public housing residents to employment opportunities and job training, and offering onsite health services.[32]

Infrastructure

In the book *All-In Nation*, a collaboration between the Center for American Progress and PolicyLink, Sarah Treuhaft, director of equitable growth initiatives at PolicyLink, writes, "Our public infrastructure is the skeletal support that makes movement, interaction, and innovation possible—connecting individuals to each other, to economic opportunities, and to regional resources."[33] At the beginning of the 20th century, cities began to grow, paving the way for a new infrastructure system of roads, sewers, water systems, and transit. Advances in technology, globalization, and climate change have changed the world we live in fundamentally, but communities of color have been disproportionately forced to rely on the infrastructure of the past.

Related resources

For more information, see David Sanchez and others, "An Opportunity Agenda for Renters: The Case for Simultaneous Investments in Residential Mobility and Low-income Communities" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Reliable, quality transportation is needed to ensure people have access to jobs.[34] People of color rely on buses and rail lines more than their white counterparts, yet public transportation in these communities is usually spotty or nonexistent, leaving many people behind. For example, Baltimore, Maryland—a major metropolitan city located in one of the wealthiest states in the union—has a long history of discriminatory policies in its transportation and housing practices.[35] Until the 1950s, because of discriminatory practices, African Americans in Baltimore were confined mainly to two areas, east and west, of downtown Baltimore. In 1972, the Maryland legislature approved new light rail lines to connect neighborhoods where a majority of residents were African American to places of employment in downtown Baltimore. Despite these efforts, many white residents vocally opposed funding for any such project. Bowing to the opposition, lawmakers scrapped it.[36]

There are similar actions taking place in Baltimore today. In 2015, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) canceled the red line rail system—a plan that was in the works for 12 years. The red line, as envisioned, would have bridged the divide between East and West Baltimore. In canceling the rail line, funds earmarked for the project are being redirected to projects in rural and suburban parts of the state.[37] The red line rail system would have provided a badly needed link between the predominately African American neighborhoods in West Baltimore, which have high rates of unemployment and poverty, to the jobs and housing opportunities in downtown Baltimore.

Fortunately, there are examples of communities across the country that show an understanding of what it means to have a 21st century infrastructure system. For example, to comply with the Clean Water Act, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is leading the way in green stormwater management.[38] Similar to many older cities, Philadelphia has long operated a combined stormwater and wastewater system, meaning that the same sewer pipes carry both wastewater and stormwater runoff.[39] As a result, after a heavy downpour the wastewater treatment process can become overburdened, and the pipes can discharge raw sewage into open waters. Moreover, stormwater runoff is a major polluter in urban waterways, as water following a storm can pick up debris, chemicals, and other pollutants when it flows across sidewalks, roads, and driveways into sewer systems and waterways.[40] To combat the problem, Philadelphia is now operating a green stormwater system that treats surface runoff through mechanisms such as bioswales, which are landscapes that soak up stormwater and its pollutants.[41] The city of Philadelphia now plans to place green stormwater systems on nearly one-third of its land over the next 25 years, creating a cheaper and more sustainable stormwater management system.[42]

In order to be successful, we must encourage communities to reform their land use ordinances to allow for a greater diversity of housing types that support renter and buyers across the income spectrum. In addition, transportation is the critical link between opportunity and success: For communities to thrive, high-quality, reliable transportation is essential. Communities of color need an infrastructure system that is conducive to their success.

Related resources

Kevin DeGood and Andrew Schwartz, "Advancing a Multimodal Transportation System by Eliminating Funding Restrictions" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015).

Kevin DeGood, "Building a 21st Century Infrastructure: How Setting Clear Goals, Establishing Accountability, and Improving Performance Will Produce Lasting and Sustainable Prosperity" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2014).

Health

Good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle are essential to creating productive communities. The saying "you are what you eat" is actually true: Research tells us that what people eat affects their behavioral and cognitive development, health, and even work productivity. The World Bank asserts that, "The effect of undernutrition on young children (ages 0-8) can be devastating and enduring. It can impede behavioral and cognitive development, educability, and reproductive health, thereby undermining future work productivity."[43] Residents in underserved communities of color often cannot access quality, nutritious food. These communities typically lack open green spaces and have fewer grocery stores featuring fresh produce and wholesome food offerings; instead, they have an abundance of corner stores featuring low-quality items, fast food outlets, and liquor stores.

These underserved communities are known as food deserts—areas where residents cannot access fresh fruit, vegetables, dairy, and nonprocessed foods.[44] According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 23.5 million Americans, mostly people of color, live in food deserts, and of those 23.5 million, 6.5 million are children.[45] Studies have found that wealthy districts have three times as many supermarkets and that white neighborhoods contain an average of four times as many supermarkets as predominantly black neighborhoods.[46] Similarly, grocery stores actually located in African American communities are usually smaller and more expensive, with a limited selection of quality food.[47]

Many communities are taking positive actions to make environments healthier for their residents. The Fondy Farmers Market, for example, is one of Milwaukee, Wisconsin's, largest and most diverse farmers markets and was created to increase economic growth and provide food security to residents of the city's North Side. It has grown from a small market to one that now serves more than 36,000 shoppers and earns close to half a million dollars in revenue per year.[48]

Taking a different approach to improving healthy food choices in poor communities, the Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative is a statewide financing program created in 2004 to provide low-cost loans for new or upgraded grocery stores in low-income neighborhoods that have limited access to fresh food.[49]

Poor communities also typically lack open green spaces. When families cannot access safe and recreational spaces, children spend less time being physically active, leading to poor health outcomes. Thirty-eight percent of Latino children and 36 percent of black children are either obese or overweight, compared with 29 percent of their white peers.[50] Obesity and other preventable diseases are a drain on the U.S. economy. America spends around $200 billion in health care costs every year on preventable diseases that also affect workforce productivity. According to *All-In Nation*, an annual $10 investment per person in healthy nutrition, the promotion of physical activity, and smoking prevention could, within just five years, yield more than $16 billion in annual health care cost savings.[51]

Lack of access to quality food and open spaces is not the only challenge in these communities. Residents also are exposed to pollution at higher rates, making them even more susceptible to health risks. In 1987, the United Church of Christ, through its Commission for Racial Justice, prepared a report, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States," that provided concrete evidence that race was more strongly correlated with the placement of a hazardous waste facility than any other single factor, and remained so even when controlling for income and geographic area. The report also indicated that three of the country's five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills, comprising 40 percent of the nation's entire commercial landfill capacity, were located in black or Hispanic communities.[52]

New York City's South Bronx—home to the United States' poorest congressional district, with African Americans and Latinos making up 43 percent and 54 percent of the community, respectively[53]—is also home to large waste management operations. While the South Bronx houses only 6.5 percent of New York City's population, it has "nine waste transfer stations, almost one-third of the total number in NYC," according to a recent study.[54] Various health problems have been linked to the placement of these waste facilities, including asthma. According to the study, "Asthma has been recognized as a grim and growing epidemic in the South Bronx for a long time, as asthma-related hospitalization and death rates have grossly and consistently outpaced the rest of the city, state, and country."[55] Overall, African American children are twice as likely to have asthma as white children, and Latino children are almost one-and-a-half times as likely to have it.[56]

Education

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared in its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that, "Segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities."[57] Yet more than 60 years after this historic ruling, students continue to be educated separately and unequally. Millions of students—mostly low-income students and students of color—attend schools that perpetuate inequities due to state and district financing systems that provide less funding to the students with the greatest need.[58]

As a result, American students are falling behind at every level of education—early, primary, secondary, and postsecondary—according to data from the U.S. Department of Education.[59] On international high school assessments, 15-year-old students in the United States rank 17th in science and 25th in math out of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 34 member countries. This puts them behind successful European countries, as well as their contemporaries in Vietnam.[60]

According to a previous CAP report, "The Economic Benefits of Closing Educational Achievement Gaps":

> Gaps in academic achievement are a function of a host of factors, such as income and wealth inequality, access to child care and preschool programs, nutrition, physical and emotional health, environmental factors, community and family structures, differences in the quality of instruction and school, and educational attainment.[61]

For instance, fewer than half of all African American and Hispanic children have access to preschool programs. By the time children from low-income families—many of whom are children of color—enter kindergarten, they can be up to a year behind their higher-income peers.[62] And many achievement gaps get worse as students continue their education. English language learners, for example, are a full year behind on reading skills compared with native English speakers by the first grade, which grows to a two-year gap by the fifth grade.[63]

To make matters worse, many low-income children of color are pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. According to the U.S. Department of Education, African American schoolchildren of all ages are more than three times more likely to be suspended and expelled than their non-Hispanic white peers. Even the youngest students of color are disproportionately affected by punitive disciplinary policies. While African American children ages 3 to 5 make up only 18 percent of preschool enrollment, they account for 42 percent of suspensions, while non-Hispanic white preschoolers make up 43 percent of preschool enrollment but only 28 percent of suspensions.[64] Young children, when pushed out of school, are "several times more likely to experience disciplinary action later in their academic career, drop or fail out of high school … and be incarcerated later in life."[65]

Despite these various challenges, there are a number of actions that could help narrow educational achievement gaps, such as policies to improve access to high-quality preschool, increase learning time for students, provide all students with excellent teachers, and ensure that schools serving students with the greatest needs receive the most funding.[66] A number of communities are utilizing these sorts of strategies with great results.

For example, Chula Vista, California—located just six miles from the U.S.-Mexico border and home to a large immigrant population, along with high rates of unemployment and poverty—boasts the innovative Chula Vista Promise Neighborhood program. This federally supported program recognizes the impact that a whole community has on children and focuses on the levers that help children "excel in school, get into college, find good jobs and lead healthy lives."[67] Local leaders learned that a prevalent fear of deportation kept residents from accessing critical services, such as violence prevention and family supports.[68] As a result, the five target schools in the community house a number of unique programs to provide students and their families with a range of

wraparound services. For example, Universidad de Padres is a program for parents and caregivers, covering topics such as health and learning.[69] Each school has a parent center run by promoters, bilingual-trained parents from the neighborhood who are available to assist families and connect them to programs. The community also includes full-day preschools, such as Mi Escuelita, a school specifically for students exposed to family violence,[70] and Escuelita del Futuro, a free, full-day preschool program that provides children with tailored learning based on individual abilities, interests, and developmental needs, along with a specialized curriculum for English language learners.[71]

According to the Center for Public Education, children's participation in high-quality preschool programs has long-lasting effects on a child's academic achievement and outcomes later in life, particularly for Latino, African American, low-income, and English language learner children.[72] Furthermore, when paired with high-quality education in grades K-3, the early gains made in preschool are enhanced as students advance through primary school.[73]

The United States is losing its competitive edge globally, in part because the education system is failing a disproportionate number of students of color. According to CAP analysis in the report "The Economic Benefits of Closing Educational Achievement Gaps," if the United States closed the achievement gap between white children and black and Hispanic children, the U.S. economy would be 5.8 percent—or nearly $2.3 trillion—larger in 2050.[74]

Conclusion

The lead poisoning disaster in Flint, Michigan, serves as a reminder that policymakers are neglecting communities across the United States, putting children of color in harm's way, and creating barriers to opportunity. Leaders should not expect children to succeed *despite* where they grew up. Instead, they should work to ensure that children of all backgrounds can succeed *in* communities that provide opportunity.

Housing, infrastructure, health, and education are the building blocks of strong communities and should be the target of increased public investment. Leaders across all sectors and levels of government can work together to correct the harmful discrepancies created by past policies—the policies that created current disparities—and ensure that, as President Barack Obama stated, "A child's course in life should be determined not by the zip code she's born in, but by the strength of her work ethic and the scope of her dreams."[75]

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